



THEORY:

Cultural hegemony

IN SUM

Politics is not only fought out in state houses, workplaces or on battlefields, but also in the language we use, the stories we tell, and the images we conjure – in short, in the ways we make sense of the world.

PIGRAPH

“The most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. Stated as an English sentence, of course, this is just a banal platitude, but the fact is that in the day to day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance.”

—David Foster Wallace

ORIGINS

Antonio Gramsci; further developed by Stuart Hall

PRACTITIONERS

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Antonio Gramsci.

Cultural hegemony is a term developed by Antonio Gramsci, activist, theorist, and founder of the Italian Communist party. Writing while imprisoned in a Fascist jail, Gramsci was concerned with how power works: how it is wielded by those in power and how it is won by those who want to change the system. The dominant idea at the time amongst Marxist radicals like himself was that in order to attain power you

needed to seize the means of production and administration — that is, take over the factories and the state. But Gramsci recognized that this was not sufficient. In his youth, he had witnessed workers take over factories in Turin, only to hand them back within weeks because they were unsure what to do with the factories, or themselves. Gramsci had also observed the skill of the Catholic Church in exercising its power and retaining the population's allegiance. Gramsci realized that in order to create and maintain a new society, you also needed to create and maintain a new consciousness.

The repository of consciousness is culture. This includes both big-C Culture, culture in an aesthetic sense, and small-c culture, culture in an anthropological sense: the norms and mores and discourses that make up our everyday lives. Culture, in this sense, is what allows us to navigate our world, guiding our ideas of right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, just and unjust, possible and impossible. You may be able to seize a factory or storm a palace, but unless this material power is backed up by a culture that reinforces the notion that what you are doing is good and beautiful and just and possible, then any gains on the economic, military and political fronts are likely to be short-lived.

The power of cultural hegemony lies in its invisibility. Unlike a soldier with a gun or a political system backed up by a written constitution, culture resides within us. It doesn't seem

“political,” it’s just what we like, or what we think is beautiful, or what feels comfortable. Wrapped in stories and images and figures of speech, culture is a politics that doesn’t look like politics and is therefore a lot harder to notice, much less resist. When a culture becomes *hegemonic*, it becomes “common sense” for the majority of the population.

No culture, however, is completely hegemonic. Even under the most complete systems of control, there are pockets of what Gramsci, and later Hall, called “counter-hegemonic” cultures: ways of thinking and doing that have revolutionary potential because they run counter to the dominant power. For Gramsci, these cultures might be located in traditional peasant beliefs or the shop-floor culture of industrial workers; for Hall they might be found in youth subcultures like Rastafarians and punks, and even in commercial entertainment. The activist’s job, according to Hall, is to identify and exploit these cultural pockets, build a radical counter-culture within the shell of the old society, and wage the struggle for a new cultural hegemony.

An important caveat: Gramsci never believed that cultural power alone was enough. The fight for cultural hegemony had to be part of an overall strategy that also incorporated struggles for political and economic power.

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FURTHER INSIGHT

Gramsci, Antonio. *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*. New York: NYU Press, 2000.

Morton, Adam. *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Economy*. London: Pluto Press, 2007.

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